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“Something most girls don’t do”

An Ethnographic Study of Women in Extreme Sports

An Honors Paper for the Department of Anthropology

By Jacqueline E. Boben

Bowdoin College, 2022

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## Abstract

Extreme sports, like skateboarding, whitewater kayaking, and skiing, have historically been male-dominated. As women's participation in these sports grows, my research asks: how do women navigate sports spaces and cultures that have for so long been defined by men? To answer this question, I draw on ethnographic research on communities of skateboarders, whitewater kayakers and skiers conducted during the summer of 2021 in Bozeman, Montana. I found that women [summarize the findings about space, summarize challenges women faced gaining entry into these groups]. Within these contexts, women leveraged gendered, embodied practices often associated with masculinity. I also found that as women create belonging for themselves, they in turn create opportunities for more dynamic and fluid gender performances.

## Acknowledgments

There are many I am grateful for regarding helping move my research to its latest form as this honors thesis. First and foremost, my research would not have been possible without the Alan M. Christenfeld Fellowship, and I am in deep gratitude for the contribution, so that I was able to immerse myself fully into my ethnographic fieldwork during the summer of 2021. In addition, this project would not be possible without the Bowdoin Anthropology Department, so I thank the department for their support. Specifically, I would like to thank within the department, Professor Shreyas Sreenath, for his guidance in my summer fieldwork, Professor Susan Kaplan, for her feedback and insight, and Professor Lauren Kohut, for diving into this project so deeply with me and guiding me along the way. This project would not have been possible without your guidance.

I adore every woman whom I wrote about in this paper and thank them for being vulnerable, open, and honest with me as I dove deep into their thoughts and hardships. Opening up about insecurities is quite difficult work but all of you were so open to sharing your highs and lows as participants within these extreme sports communities. I made friendships along the way which I cherish quite deeply.

## Dedication

*For my dear Finny,  
a free spirit who always encouraged me to be true to myself.  
You will always be a guiding light.*

## CHAPTER ONE: IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

*Two terrified parents and Carly hunched over Ted's iPhone as he played a video of himself kayaking his first waterfall. "You are just so crazy!" Carly's Mom told Ted with an endearing smile. Carly, 18 at the time, adored her baby brother Ted, 3 years her junior. Carly grinned at her baby brother as she watched him soar down the gushing water and thought that "it was so rad". While she was celebratory for him, she felt slightly resentful of her brother's accomplishments but was unsure of the reason.*

*A few hours after watching Ted's video, Carly had fallen into a deep YouTube hole; watching video after video of whitewater kayakers from across the globe going off waterfalls, paddling rapids with 15-foot waves and the occasional person swimming through some whitewater. In one, a kayaker with a long ponytail down their back surfed a wave on the Zambezi River, the fourth longest river in Africa, starting in Zambia and emptying into the Indian Ocean in Mozambique. She paused the video abruptly and skipped back ten seconds. Did she see that correctly? "No way that is a girl," she thought to herself. At first, she thought the person "must just be a hippie kayaker dude," but the video credits confirmed it was a "female paddler." Five hundred dollars later, Carly was the owner of a second-hand whitewater Jackson fun kayak, paddle, helmet, and spray skirt; ready to launch herself off waterfalls like her younger brother had.*

Five years later, I was sitting next to Carly nested in the walls of "the gorge" on the moss-covered rocks next to the rambling Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone River after an afternoon of paddling as she recounted her parents' reaction to her impulsive kayak purchase. We watched the sun begin to drift below the gorge walls as we waited for our friend Karl to come pick us up in his rusting red truck. We were talking about how each of us had found



kayaking which led her to tell me this tale. “My parents gave me a very hesitant reaction when I first told them I wanted to also whitewater kayak,” she explained, adding that they did not know she was interested in “that sort of activity.” Carly believed what her parents meant by “that sort of activity” were activities associated with thrill and risk such as whitewater kayaking. She explained that although her parents did not explicitly try to prevent her from whitewater kayaking, she felt that—as a woman—d there were subtle ways she was discouraged from activities that involve risk. Both she and Ted were active in sports as kids. As she grew older, Carly increasingly focused on gymnastics. By contrast, her brother was introduced to whitewater kayaking in middle school through an all-boys camp that focused on different extreme sports. The summer camps Carly attended never involved learning how to kayak or rock climb like her brothers’ summer camp. The difference was not her parents’ support or lack thereof, but rather the sports they were each introduced to.

Carly and I bonded over constantly being told to “be careful,” whether it was driving to the grocery store or skiing for the day. We noted how thrill-seeking activities, such as whitewater kayaking, are not offered as an option to women the same way they are for men mostly because they are cast as “risky.”

Extreme sports—such as skiing, whitewater kayaking, and skateboarding— have long been dominated by men. Active participants within these sports have always been known for having wild and rebellious personalities whether they are skiing naked down the mountain yelling, “I’m the best skier on the mountain” as they do in the famous ski movie *G.N.A.R.* , ‘shotgunning’ a beer before kayaking for good luck or skateboarding in the middle of traffic (Gaffney and Gaffney 2011). Risk and thrill are central themes of these communities, and these discourses are often associated with masculinity, making them not seem as well suited for

women. The arena of extreme sports is diversifying, however. This change is evident in the increased participation of women athletes in extreme sports (Donnelly 2006). Despite this trend, how does the increased participation of women change the culture within these extreme sports of whitewater kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding?

Questions about the place of women in extreme sports came to me during the summer of 2020 when I was working as a raft guide in Bozeman, Montana. Many customers, especially men, told me they “didn't know such a small person could be so loud.” Customers questioned my ability to guide a raft, and I learned that acting overly confident squashed their fears and my own insecurities. The guides were predominantly men, and I had never been surrounded by such a group of gritty, rowdy, and excitable people. Outgoing and bombastic, I thrived in this environment and quickly learned how to fit into this overwhelmingly masculine atmosphere. I knew not to take getting “beer fines”, whether for tying a strap improperly or getting stuck on a rock while on the river with customers, too seriously. Never had I been told by co-workers to “get my sh\*t together” or “try not to f\*\*k this up” until that summer. While I had assimilated easily into the raft guide environment, it was still a bit of a culture shock coming from my small liberal arts college, emphasizing political correctness and academic pursuits. I was now being schooled in the many ways of how to “man up.”

I continued living in Bozeman through August 2021, well after my raft guide job ended. Bowdoin College had moved classes online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not until I had been living in Bozeman for about six months, and skiing on average four days a week, did I realize how much I had transformed. My tastes in music had become more focused on the psychedelic rock bands rather than my usual comforts of Taylor Swift. Skiing and kayaking were my main sources of socializing, rather than school activities such as acapella. My social

experiences as a remote student in Bozeman were so different from my experiences at Bowdoin. While I missed the intense academic lifestyle and intentional community at Bowdoin, I had found in the Bozeman community people who challenged me in a different way. I made friends, many of whom were women, through common interests in extreme sports. This new type of social connections had brought with it many small personal changes to my life which were reflected in how I dressed, socialized, and carried myself. I drew a connection between these changes in personal style to the changes in communities where the common bond was white water kayaking, skateboarding, and skiing. This new culture in which I was immersed had changed the ways I lived everyday life.

This project emerged from my own experiences participating in whitewater kayaking and skiing in male dominated communities. Despite the connections I was building within these sports communities, I sometimes felt that my femininity made me an outsider in these settings. When I shared these insecurities with some of the women I had befriended, I was surprised to find that many of them were experiencing the *same insecurities about their femininity* when participating in these sports and in these spaces. Within this thesis, I demonstrate that the reason women face more challenges than men do in these sports and spaces lies in the masculine culture of the spaces.

Despite the barriers women face gaining entry to extreme sports communities, mastering these sports and gaining acceptance in the sports' cultures was empowering for many of the women whom I observed. Their experiences in stretching the boundaries of the conceived societal limits of being a woman through whitewater kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding inspired me to understand the how women navigate and challenge this hypermasculine culture.

My work centers on skateboarders, skiers, and kayakers; three overlapping extreme sports communities in Bozeman, Montana. While women engage with masculine discourses, they are not passive participants within these communities and are impacting these spaces, making them more inclusive to people from all backgrounds. Women's participation in whitewater kayaking, skiing and skateboarding has expanded the bounds of how someone can express themselves as a woman within these spaces.

### Women in Extreme Sports

Previous literature has found that extreme sports communities are typically associated with masculinity, and in turn, are generally less welcoming to women (Brymer 2010). Despite growing participation by women, prior research generally finds an association between masculinity, risk, and extreme sports which produces a more masculine culture through these acts of risk (CITES). For example, Atencio, Beal and Wilson (2009: 2) observe that, historically, masculine bodies in skateboarding were considered the ones with risk taking behavior and the technical skills, whereas feminine bodies were observed as being the careful and gentle ones, thus creating a dynamic where women are excluded from skateboarding and not valued in associated skateboarding media.

As a result of the broad associations between masculinity and aptitude for extreme sports, scholars have generally found that feminine traits are less valued than male characteristics. Drawing on their study of an "All-Girl" skate clinic, Atencio, Beal, and Wilson found that while all women events like the "All-Girl" skate clinic allowed for more female participation, the event did not undermine the overwhelmingly masculine sports culture. They instead found that "'All Girl' participants actually resisted the traditional notions of (hetero)sexual femininity being represented by the event" (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009: 5). Stoddart's (2011) research on

skiing also provides some clues as to why women may still choose to act in ways perceived to be “masculine” even during all-women events. Drawing on interviews and textual analysis, Stoddart found that being “cautious” and “in control” are negative attributes in skiing and are also associated with femininity, while “risk taking” and “speed” are both desirable traits of a good skier and are associated with masculinity. In this way, masculinity is conceptually linked to success within extreme sports.

The extreme sports spaces, such as skating on the streets or backcountry, are observed by researchers as masculine spaces. Stoddart (2011:120) concluded that masculine discourses of sportscapes found in popular ski magazines crossed over with the embodied masculine performances within the relating spaces, such as the backcountry areas that illustrated ‘risk’ and the ‘sublime’, making where skiing is performed masculine. Though Stoddart focuses on the gendering of these spaces, he also emphasizes that the “social interaction and discourse shape the cultural meaning of space” (Stoddart 2011:110), such that people’s interactions influence how space and the elements within the space, such as the mountains, snow, and other non-human matter in the space, are perceived. Within skiing, this results in differences in how parts of the mountain are gendered. While groomed terrain and defined runs are conceptualized as more feminine spaces, that backcountry and out-of-bounds areas are perceived as masculine. Within skateboarding, street skating is seen as a creative and “self-made” way to skate compared to skating at skateparks, that is both more valued and perceived as more masculine by the skate community than what? (Atencio 2009). This gendering of space is reflected in media representations of skateboarding. Not only are women underrepresented in skating magazines like *Thrasher*, but when they are featured, it is more often they are not featured partaking in street skating but rather in a more controlled environment like a skatepark, therefore making

street spaces seem like not a part of women skating, and therefore making these spaces masculine centered (Atencio, Beal , and Wilson 2009).

While prior research on women on extreme sports has shown that extreme sports are a masculine dominant culture, these approaches have primarily drawn upon the more professional and organized spheres of extreme sports, relying upon print media such as magazines, statistics about certain genders participating at different extreme sports related gatherings, and structured interviews of women at organized skiing or skateboarding events. While organized events are important arenas for extreme sports, my study focuses on the more informal, everyday settings where people are learning and more often participating in various extreme sports. Examining women's participation in extreme sports within these more informal spaces provides a window into the more nuanced ways that women use gendered performance to create space for themselves within predominately male environments. It also reveals the important, if at times, subtle ways that women are transforming the culture within the male dominant spaces of whitewater kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding.

## Theory

### Gender Performance

This thesis explores women's gendered performances within extreme sports. Rather than viewing gender as a way people innately behave, I examine how masculinity and femininity are performed through ways of dress and embodiment. While these performances may be unintentional, these performances are learned from other peoples actions of how other perform their gender making gender scripted.

I draw on Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity. Butler argues that parodies of gender, such as through drag, are ways that illustrate the construction of gender because these

people fail to fully “embody” these genders (Butler 1985: 186). Butler argues that “there is no doer behind the deed”, but rather the “doer is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler 1985:181), which intertwines the ideas of embodied gender performance. This means that ideas such as gender being something that is innate is false but rather gender is something that is constructed by the embodiment and continued performance of a gender. Toward this end, embodiment eliminates the separation between the mind and body, viewing them as one, rather than as separate entities, where the mind controls the body (Csordas 2002).

Embodiment informs not only how I examine the gendered performance of my subjects, but also how I understand my position as an ethnographer. Anthropology recently has seen a shift in ethnographies focusing on the concept of embodiment, which looks at how the ethnographer’s body influences the space and observation. For example, Atencio studied how the “embodied attributes” of risk an individual shows within skateboarding influences the amount of social capital one has within the community (Atencio, Beal & Wilson 2009: 5). Embodied attributes of risk means that the more a person illustrates risk, whether through completing a difficult skate trick or wearing clothing featuring curse words, the more a person will be embodying risk, therefore gaining greater acceptance into the culture. In my research, aspects of embodiment rose to the surface when understanding how I personally carried myself in more masculine ways when raft guiding.

My lived body experiences as a woman within these male-dominated spaces informs some mechanisms such as dress and way of talking to fit in and feel as an authentic part of the culture. While I focus on the experiences of other women, my individual participation influences what issues to focus on such as the spaces being masculine or feeling excluded due to my femininity. I write about how my embodied experience influences my interpretations of the

actions and words of others within my ethnographic fieldwork. This can be seen through me adding my personal perspective into vignettes throughout the paper.

### Gendering sportscaapes

The embodied performance of extreme sports cannot be disentangled from the landscapes within which they take place. Skateboarding, whitewater kayaking, and freestyle skiing are place-based activities centered around the outdoor spaces of mountains, rivers, and skateparks. I draw on theories of place (Casey 1996; Massey 1994) to understand how seemingly natural features and built environments become transformed into specific “sportscaapes” (Stoddart 2011) within which these extreme sports are performed. Casey describes how place is an area imbued with value and meaning, and recognizable as a discrete space (Casey 1996). For Casey, places do not come prefigured, but instead emerge from our embodied interactions with them. When entering space, perception is the initial way that we interpret the space to transform the surroundings into a place, making a place less physically discrete, but rather the conceptions people place upon that physical space (Casey 1996: 22). Casey’s theory helps foment the idea that people’s perceptions of certain places are influenced by what they are focused on when coming to the space. For example, when a person approaches a river to whitewater kayak, they do not focus on the geological formations of the canyon walls or the plant species that stand below them. Rather, they focus on the big fluffy whitewater that lays ahead and the danger involved by paddling these rapids.

Casey’s claim that places emerge through embodied experience necessitates examination of how the embodied experience might vary across differently positioned subjects. Examining how embodied experiences may differ across differently positioned subjects led me to find Massey’s work on the intersection of geography and gender to be useful to my research in understanding women’s experience of these sportscape geographies. Massey observes that space



is gendered through what values are associated with the space. Values are centered around cultural norms associated and in terms of gender could be centered around what is culturally accepted way for a certain gender to act. These values' determine how certain gender bodies can move within spaces inform our understanding of how the spaces are considered masculine or feminine (Massey 1994: 178). Within extreme sports, these values typically include risk and thrill. influence how bodies can move through the spaces.

Expectations of gendered performances in turn become entwined with the physical parts of geography, such as rocks, trees, rivers, or buildings. Massey uses the example of the physical space of a house, which people generally associate with women as playing the gender role of the "homemaker" or the one responsible for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, while men are not associated with the same responsibilities toward the house. Massey argues that women are almost always considered homemakers, which is a gendered role related to a geography (Massey 1994: 179-180). Within my own work this concept can be applied to 'skate rats' who are expected to be boys at the skatepark whose whole identity is skateboarding. The space informs the expected role of the individual based on their gender.

To capture the way that both "natural" and built landscapes are constructed and maintained as spaces for extreme sports, I borrow Stoddart's term "sportscape" (Stoddart 2011). In his study of backcountry versus groomed ski settings, Stoddart uses the term to describe different skiing terrain on the mountain such as more advanced terrain with obstacles versus groomed, less steep terrain. He found that these distinct sportscares were differently gendered with advanced backcountry terrain viewed as more masculine, whereas easier terrain was viewed as more feminine (Stoddart 2011). 'Sportscares' are useful in defining boundaries of the areas that I study within my ethnographic research since many of these interactions occur in open

undefined spaces like the backcountry. By using the sportscape concept, I was able to analyze how people interact within the bounds of where they participate in the sport.

## Methods

I spent the summer of 2021 conducting ethnographic research on women who participate in extreme sports in Bozeman, Montana, and the surrounding areas in the American West. My informants were primarily young adults between the ages of 19 and 30 years who engaged in at least one of the three sports I studied: whitewater kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding. In Bozeman, these sports communities overlap considerably and many of my informants participated more than one of these sports I applied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of my informants. All major informants and those photographed signed informed consent forms so that their information could be used for this project. At any moment during the research process, they had full permission to drop out and any details regarding their experience as a woman in extreme sports removed from the project. My research was approved in July by the IRB at Bowdoin College.

My ethnographic research methods included formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and outside research on gender, place, and ecology. Participant observation was the primary way I gathered information on how women exist within the masculine culture of extreme sports. My participant observation included my participating in whitewater kayaking, skateboarding, and skiing. All extreme sports communities are very insular and exclusive, so participation is necessary to gain the trust and respect of people within the community. I felt as though I had to prove my skill in each sport to be able to interview and talk to people at skateparks, on the river, on the mountain, or in social areas outside of the different sportscares.

Throughout my time in Bozeman, I formed relationships with many women who participated in extreme sports and who became some of the main informants for my research. With their permission, I used many of their stories in my research to capture the essence of a woman identifying individually in the scope of extreme sports. During my research, I engaged six different women in formal individual interviews, followed by informal interviews. In addition, I conducted many informal interviews with both men and women participants. Informal interviews were typically one on one conversations that happened in the field (i.e., ski mountain, skatepark, river) which were not audio recorded. I would write down important quotes from our conversations in my field journal, which was the extent to which their words were recorded.

I found that talking to groups of women gave me much insight into how gender performance is influenced by extreme sports. These group interviews were usually conducted with a few women who were close friends with each other. Women felt more comfortable sharing more negative experiences, especially negative experiences with other women, in these settings.

I also drew upon social media to analyze the common themes seen within kayaking, skiing and skateboarding. Sponsorship is an important component of extreme sports and one that is primarily carried out through social media. Following online content, magazines and video blogs was important to understanding women's positions within these sports more broadly. In addition, women have used social media to counter the male dominance of the sports. Using these methods, I was able to have a greater relationship with informants and make deeper insights into how these spaces can be oppressive but also empowering to women. I was able to see the changes that occurred as certain individuals became more involved in a sport or the refusal to accept the parts of extreme sports culture that can be exclusionary towards women.

## Overview of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is organized into five chapters. In Chapter Two, I define extreme sports and provide an overview of each respective sport: whitewater kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding. In addition, I detail the field site, Bozeman, Montana, where the research was based and other geographical locations, such as different rivers and ski mountains, which are the focus in later chapters.

In Chapter Three, I draw on examples from my ethnographic fieldwork to examine how places where extreme sport take place, such as the river, the backcountry skiing terrain, and skateparks, are perceived as masculine places. As shown by my fieldwork, these places are often defined by men or men typically are seen as the ones who have the most knowledge of these extreme sport spaces, thereby making them be perceived as spaces belonging to men rather than to everyone.

I build upon these observations in Chapter Four by looking more closely at the ways that women leverage masculine performances within these masculine spaces. I observe embodied masculinity within women during their participation in extreme sports. These performances are used to help individuals fit in more to the masculine spaces.

Chapter Five shifts the focus to examine on how women have transformed the extreme sports culture. I explain how women are slowly transforming the culture to be more inclusive to women through certain acts, such women acting as guides for other women into the sport, presenting in a manner that brings out female identity and creating all female focused extreme sports groups. In Chapter Six, I conclude that although the extreme sports culture tends to be masculine, which can result in them being inclusive, women have transformed these spaces and have become empowered within this culture.



## CHAPTER TWO: BOZEMAN AND EXTREME SPORTS

The term "extreme sports" is quite young; it was coined in the 1990s as a marketing tool for the "X-games", an annual extreme sport competition, and the "Extreme Sports Channel" on television. "Extreme sports" is a broad category including everything from ultra-running to BASE jumping. Broadly speaking, these are outdoor sports that involve some danger. Many of these sports grew from risky leisure activities like surfing, whitewater rafting, skiing, and bungee jumping; activities that were often restricted to vacations (Creyer et al. 2003). But because these activities can be performed at "various degrees of difficulty, danger, and expertise" (Buckley 2018, 8), the exact definition of an extreme sport is unclear (Olivier 2006, Brymer 2010). I study whitewater kayaking, skateboarding, and skiing because these are extreme sports that encapsulate the typical, nontraditional and thrill-filled sports prevalent in my field site.

In many ways, risk is the defining characteristic of extreme sports, though risk is similarly difficult to pin down. In academic literature focusing on the appeal of these sports that have risk, they are defined broadly as high-risk outdoor recreation activities (Renn and Swaton 1984). Some sources emphasize that mistakes in the respective sport could result in severe injury or death (Renn and Swaton 1984; Harris and Jenkins 2006). This vein of research has typically focused on understanding risk-taking behavior (Brymer 2010, Kuzikova 2020, Buckley 2018, Horton 2003). This research focuses on sports that are more individual and require great commitment to succeed, including whitewater kayaking, free skiing, and BASE jumping. These elements of risk have correspondingly resulted in these sports being labelled as masculine activities. Due the entanglements of risk and extreme sports, these sports have been broadcasted to men therefore making men "pioneers" of extreme sports and the ones attributed with pushing the limits to what is possible in skiing, skateboarding, and kayaking (Birell 2007).

## Brief histories of three sports

### *Freeride Skiing*

While I focus on many aspects and types of skiing within my thesis, I mostly emphasize freeride skiing because it encapsulates many dangerous and gendered aspects of skiing. Freeride skiing style is a form of skiing or snowboarding on open terrain, away from groomed slopes that involves more risk than the typical resort skiing. This skiing style involves skiing in powder fields, thick trees, steep slopes, cliffs, and cornices. Many times, freeride skiers will add challenges to this style by performing tricks like backflips or 360 degree turns off features such as cliffs. A good freeride skier is one who is willing to take risk in the line that they ski or who can ski in deep rather than groomed terrain. Freeride skiing is an extreme sport because it involves many hazards and obstacles in the terrain like trees or rocks, jumping off such obstacles, and the chance of encountering avalanches while skiing.

A turning point for women in skiing was at the 1936 Garmisch-Partenkirchen Olympics. That Olympics is where the combined event of slalom and downhill skiing was added and open to men and women for competition. Women did not become a recognized part of freeride skiing until later in the 1990s, making the foundation of the culture established by men. Today, women represent around 38 percent of the freeride ski population (Athena 2019).

### *Skateboarding*

Skateboarding derived from scooters and surfing, making it once known as “street surfing”. Currently about 77 percent of skateboarders identify as men therefore significantly outnumbering the women skateboarders. Although the male population is much higher, women have been skateboarding since its invention in the 1940s, but like all extreme sports have been discriminated against and represented less than men (Borden 2001). There are many different locations where people can skate. There is the original “do it yourself” attitude street

skateboarding location, where people skate in parking lots using the stairs as barriers and ramps. These areas are not designated skate areas but rather areas where skateboarders will use everyday parts of their landscape to skate. There is a rebellious side to skateboarding in using areas for their non-intended purpose. There are also skateparks, which include different obstacles such as ramps, bowls, and rails that are designated areas where people skateboard.

### *Whitewater Kayaking*

Although whitewater sports have been around for over a hundred years, whether it was loggers rafting down rivers to carry cargo or John Wesley Powell boating down the Grand Canyon in 1869, whitewater kayaking did not become popular until the mid-1990s after Perception came out with a maneuverable and indestructible boat. Thereafter, there was a spike in whitewater kayak participation following the creation of the Perception kayak brand, but the sport experienced a rapid decline in participation after 2002 which affected the industry (Schaffer 2009). Around the late 1990s and 2000s, with the decline of people buying boats, there was a decline in the ability to sponsor different athletes, and all the sponsored athletes were male. Whitewater kayaking is where I found the most masculine culture and where women felt they were most pressured into partaking in masculine culture. In one of the biggest whitewater kayaking races, North Fork Championship in Banks, Idaho, 121 men versus 28 women signed up in the preliminary race. This paucity of female representation in whitewater kayaking is evident in the absence of literature on the history of women in whitewater kayaking, in contrast to more current news of women such as Nouria Newman and Sage Donnelly breaking barriers in the whitewater community (Dickman 2020).

### The field-site: Bozeman

Montana is known for being cowboy country, a part of the Rocky Mountain American West. Bozeman was named after and colonized in 1883 by John M. Bozeman, who established



the Bozeman trail, a connector trail between the gold rush area of Southern Montana and the Oregon trail. However, the Crow Nation as well as the Blackfeet, Shoshone, Nez Perce, Flathead, and Sioux Nations, were the original occupants of the land now called Bozeman. Bozeman is also part of Gallatin County, the same county which includes the Gallatin River, Bridger Bowl ski area, the towns of Belgrade and Three Forks, and a portion of Big Sky ski area, providing easy access to two top ski areas, making it attractive to avid skiers. I was drawn to Bozeman due its great access to kayaking and skiing.

I moved to Bozeman, Montana, in May of 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to work as a raft guide on the Gallatin River. I was drawn to Bozeman for the access to the mountains and rivers, the Montana spirit, absence of crowds, and its large college-aged population. I had planned to work the summer as a raft guide and then return to Brunswick, Maine, for my Junior year of college. In the end I did not leave Bozeman until August of 2021 because my school was mostly remote, and I had fallen in love with the place and the people. I did not know anyone in Bozeman except for my sister and made the bold decision to live with 5 strangers whom I contacted through a 100-word ad on Craigslist. These strangers ended up being some of my best friends and key informants for my research.

Bozeman is the home to Montana State University, a four-year public Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho (WWAMI) state university with a student population of just under 17,000. Montana State University is jokingly referred to as “Bridger Bowl Academy” in reference to the local ski mountain. Just a 20-minute drive from downtown Bozeman, Bridger Bowl is where the Montana locals ski and is known for its access to advanced skiing terrain. Bridger Bowl may be on a smaller mountain than resorts such as Big Sky in Montana, but the mountain features a ridge line along which one can hike to ski advanced terrain. It is practically

law that when it snows a lot and a student has class, that powder comes before class. Many Montana State University students expressed to me that they specifically chose to go there for their secondary education because of the easy access to great terrain.

Bozeman's proximity to the Yellowstone Club, a country club ski mountain and Big Sky, the largest ski resort in the United States, is a draw for young folks who do not attend Montana State University, making the "ski bum" lifestyle doable. The "ski bum" lifestyle is one where skiing is the central part of your life in the winter months and people make money to ski and live where they can ski. During the off (non-ski) season, many people can be found skating the Bozeman bowl as well as other skate spots in the area. Snow sports are typically the main attraction that attracts people to Bozeman, but access to other extreme sports and community are typically what make people stay.

While Bozeman may not be known for kayaking like it is for skiing, there is access to whitewater on the Gallatin River about 30 minutes away from its downtown. The Gallatin River is the typical local whitewater spot, located right next to the highway in the canyon on the road to Big Sky. Many Bozeman locals can be found running post workday laps on the Gallatin River throughout the summer.

While I was based in Bozeman, Montana, for the summer research, some of my notes, interviews, and observations were taken outside of Bozeman in Western Montana, Southeast Idaho, and northern Oregon. I travelled to different skate parks with more intense and unique features than local skate parks, paddled different rivers, attended one of the largest whitewater kayak races in the United States, and partook in summer skiing. Extreme sports participation requires travelling to various places to master different terrains and to increase skill level. The extreme sports lifestyle also involves following your sports season and that also requires travel.

While my main informants and those discussed in coming chapters are all based in Bozeman, I used some information about people who did not live in Bozeman to understand the culture of each sport more deeply.

## CHAPTER THREE: GENDERED GEOGRAPHIES

*Ten girls are cramped into a small garage in the backyard of a house that, similarly to the garage, looks like it may fall apart. A broken window is covered with cardboard and a poster depicting a woman in red lacy lingerie. Cigarette butts and crushed beer cans surround my feet on the cold cracked concrete ground. I look up in the rafters where various bikes and old string lights hang. In the right corner there are power tools scattered around some pieces of wood, and in the left corner where I sit on one of the old couches found on roadsides there are downhill skies and ski boots lining the walls. Towards the back wall of the small garage lies a two and half foot tall half-pipe shaped structure; a skate ramp made from stolen plywood and PVC pipe marked with a black spray paint skull, which is the main attraction of this dingy and musty place. About a foot of snow sits outside the wooden chipped panes that hold together the garage structure. Some girls huddle drinking beers and chatter around a space heater on the old couches, while the others rotate turns on the ramp for who drops in next. All the girls came to this garage with the intention of skating, whether to improve their skills, try something new, or drop into a mini ramp for the first time. As the music rotates between the heavy metal band Weedeater and 2-Pac, I was struck by the masculinity of the place despite being surrounded by women.*

I was surrounded by signs of masculinity whether it was the dirty floor covered in beer cans and cigarettes, the loud aggressive music, or the décor which hypersexualized and objectified women. I was in a masculine setting even though the place was filled with all women. Masculine energy echoed throughout the room independent the people inside the garage. This is a common thread I discovered while researching –inhabitants of a space such as a skatepark or ski run did not all need to be men for the place to be masculine. I wanted to understand how

these extreme sports settings are constructed to be masculine and how these masculine settings influence women within these sports.

In this chapter I will look at how these extreme sports spaces are introduced and constructed to be masculine, retain their masculinity even with the presence of women which makes it more difficult for women to feel comfortable in these spaces.

### Constructing the natural world

The sports I examine—skiing, whitewater kayaking, and skateboarding—are activities deeply tied to specific landscapes. The places where these sports take place often appear natural or undefined because they take place outside sometimes where human interference does not seem present. However, these places are constructed by participants into places through their embodied action: participating in whitewater kayaking, skiing, or skateboarding. I use Stoddart's (2011) term “sportscape” to understand that these areas of participating in sport are defined places. The boundary of the “sportscape” is the perceived end of where the sport does not exist. I kept my focus of women in extreme sports within these boundaries meaning that areas that were not centered around these sports were not areas where I would partake in observation.

Casey facilitates in my understanding of how these places come into being through our embodied interactions and past experiences within these spaces. The people who typically first come into these sportscares and dominate them are men which therefore influences how users after these people see the sportscape. Casey (1996) argues that there is development from space to a place through embodied experiences. Casey (1996) argues that places can be historical, social, physical, and psychological meaning that places can be more the actual place in terms of meaning to individuals and therefore constructed by not even visiting a place. This distinction can be seen within extreme sports where spaces that would be unnoticeable and

undistinguishable for activity are transformed into places for play. For example, a parking lot may appear as to only have the purpose to park a person's car but someone who skateboards may see it as place to skateboard due to the handicap ramps, rails, curbs and being well lit at night. The space is transformed into something some would see as a place to simply park your car to now a place where people skateboard.

Space and place are such essential parts of extreme sports because they often take place in a "natural" outdoor setting such as the backcountry ski terrain where Tate skied. Although they may appear "natural" these places are still socially constructed by humans. The word "natural" typically implies a certain sublime image of pristine forest or mountains untouched by humans, however none of these places whether they are a free flow river or a concrete skatepark are natural (Cronon 1996) . Lefebvre (1991) illustrates how space is a result of a social product and determines spatial practices and perceptions, therefore spaces and places even if in a wilderness setting are not natural. While spaces where extreme sports take place may seem natural because they take place in an undeveloped setting or one where it feels as though humans have not altered the space, through human interaction and recognition of a space such as a nearby natural running river turns the river into a distinct human space that kayakers revisit to go paddling the place is not natural.

### *Her 'boy side' in backcountry*

Tate walks in, arm in a sling, wearing cast from her elbow to her thumb. Shocked, I offer a quick greeting, and ask her what happened. Tate had been skiing the backcountry at Bridgers Bowl a few weeks prior. As she described it, the day was "fantastic" with "unreal snow." At one point she launched off a rock and landed the wrong way, resulting in a fractured radius and

dislocated shoulder. “It was the backcountry powder and those boys that got me a little over ambitious.” Three days prior to the sunny March Day when Tate went backcountry skiing, there had been a snowstorm with 16 inches of accumulation in Bozeman and even more in the Bridger Mountains. Once the avalanche danger subsided, Tate was invited to ski with her boyfriend and a couple of mutual friends. While she was enjoying skiing with them, she also felt pressure to prove her ability because the others were more experienced in the backcountry setting than she was.

The social construction of the sportscares was clear from the ways women reflected on how their mindsets and behavior changed when they were within them. For example, at ski resorts women often felt watched and that they did not belong when at the terrain park, whereas at another open powder run, they would feel more empowered. Whether it was being extremely self-conscious, taking more risks than typical, or feeling empowered, these areas engendered different feelings and behaviors, an illustration of the creation of these spaces. In addition, the physical spaces shaped the possibilities for acting within them. Cliffs could become jumps, or rails could become tricks.

Tate continued to sigh looking at her arm and remarking on how it was just being there with those boys in the backcountry that caused her to push beyond her limits. She remarked how if other women had been present, maybe she would not have felt as pressured to push herself but that “no matter what, the snow brings out the boy in me.” Most women saw these places as masculine spaces. Most women recognized that these places had mostly been inhabited by men making these sportscares appear as places for men rather than all genders. While participation of women within these extreme sports has increased and sometimes the ratio of men to women is close to equal, the spaces at times remain unchanged by women being in them.

In viewing this backcountry skiing area as a sportscape, it can be understood how the area influenced Tate's actions and led her to take more risks. If her actions were also analyzed individually, they would have been seen as reckless, but within a freeride backcountry setting jumping off snow covered rocks is a part of being in the space. Although Tate was in the backcountry where the space is perceived by participants as a wild landscape since the backcountry is not defined by clear boundaries such as a ski trail, the place is still socially constructed into a skiing landscape. This is not an area simply seen as an unmarked side of a mountain, but now an area feasible to ski not only by Tate and her friends, but also those who saw their photos or were told about the area in which they were skiing.

Tate slowly nods her head telling me that her "ambitious and competitive boy side came out in the backcountry." This backcountry skiing sportscape is masculine because while Tate did not explicitly describe the backcountry as masculine, she connected her injury in the backcountry to skiing with men in the backcountry and feeling the need to prove that she could handle skiing in the backcountry. In addition, this extreme sportscape is masculine because Tate wanted to "dominate" the backcountry ski run which does not refer to dominating over the men but dominating the mountain. By going off cliffs and skiing fast, or in other words "dominating", Tate was performing successfully within the bounds of the sportscape.

The masculinity of these sportsapes can be a barrier for women who want to enter these spaces. Many women feel so uncomfortable after first experiences in these spaces that they do not try to participate in these sports again. The culture can be jarring in that a woman is expected to be "manly" in order to have a chance of feeling comfortable within these spaces due to the scary elements of the sports and the culture.

*Entering the Rough Waters*



*Becca nervously stretches her neoprene spray skirt over the cockpit of her blue, black, and purple dagger RPM whitewater kayak at the put-in of the Yellowstone River in Yankee Jim Canyon. Just two months prior, Becca was on a multiday whitewater raft trip which inspired her to learn how to whitewater kayak. She bought a boat off Craigslist and started going to local Bozeman pool sessions to learn some of the basics. It was a fun stress reliever splashing around in her kayak in the pool but now she found her palms sweaty, heart beat unsteady, and noted a warm sensation travel throughout her body. The water moves quickly past her, leading down to where the canyon walls narrow to create the first rapid: "Yankee Jim's Revenge" and it surely looks vengeful. The green water turns into intermittent white ripples which flow down over rock in center of the river creating a five-foot whitewater crashing wave. She is about to make her maiden voyage whitewater kayaking accompanied by her boyfriend and two of his friends whom she refers to as "the boys". Becca tries to not freak herself out by the rapids that lie ahead.*

*A hard pit sits in her stomach turning over and over since she had scouted out some of the first rapids, she will ever kayak. Exhaling, she tells herself quietly "I will probably swim, and it will be fine." She repeats this herself over and over with every exhale to assure herself that swimming in whitewater is normal and that she does not need perform as well as the two boys. Anyway, isn't she here to have fun? "Swimming" refers to when a whitewater paddler rolls upside down with their head submerged in the water attached to their kayak and is unable to roll back up, so the paddler pulls their kayak skirt from the cockpit which attaches them to the boat, so they are released into the water and therefore swimming. It is typical for any beginner kayaker to swim and more than likely to do so their first time in whitewater. She knew that while some whitewater can be deadly to swim, there was little chance of any major injury along this whitewater section.*

*Looking for guidance, Becca asks the boys for some tips if in case she does swim. Their responses are not reassuring. One of them compares swimming in whitewater “like being in a washing machine” but advises that she should “just try to stay calm”. “How useful!” she thinks sarcastically. Then, instead of giving her some useful pointers or words of affirmation, the boys begin to recall their increasingly scary experiences swimming in whitewater, each story frightening Becca even more. As the boys’ debate over who had the most life-threatening swim, her fists start to clench as fear turns into anger. It was her first-time whitewater kayaking, and she was hoping the boys would make it be a comforting space rather than an intimidating one. As she told me, “I felt like they were jerking each other off bragging about near death experiences”.*

There are different ways in which this landscape was shaped to be masculine, therefore illustrating the challenges women face when entering these extreme sportsapes. The whitewater in the river had drawn kayakers, who are mostly men, to come to this place. Rapids in the river are often given specific names such “Yankee Jim’s Revenge” which conjure a sense of fear and danger rather than safety. Whitewater kayaking participants do not physically change Yankee Jim Canyon but change how the canyon is perceived. In the eyes of the whitewater kayaker, the river brought attention to this space which grew into a place that had personality. This personality had directly affected how Becca acted and her mindset towards the river. She was willingly going into some of the most dangerous part of the landscape. The attitudes and actions of the men with whom she paddled that day, the names of the rapids, and her personal experience and feeling towards the river made it become more than just a river but a place she associated with feeling nervous and “out of place”. From this first experience Becca learned certain ways to

think and carry herself in these places whether she was actively whitewater kayaking or loading the boats on top of her Subaru.

Moreover, Becca learned how the space came into being masculine spaces by observing specific features of the river. Ten minutes earlier Becca and the boys had scouted the different rapids to familiarize Becca with the river by reviewing some basics in reading water. There are rapids, sections of the water with waves, whitewater and eddies, pools of calm water caused by an obstruction in the river, and flatwater, calm sections. Then there are the holes, where water drops over an obstruction into deeper water causing it to recirculate back to the surface, lateral waves, waves which come from the side and could knock you over, v-waves, waves where the kayaker has to hit the center of the “v” and drops, spots where the river drops a bit in elevation. Becca’s initial impressions of the place were influenced by the boys’ perceptions of the space. Their nonchalant attitudes about danger and actions such as smoking weed before paddling are based around masculine mannerisms.

Becca was shocked by how the boys understood this masculine landscape. The boys explained the river as an unforgiving entity that “doesn’t give f\*\*\* about you and will show you who is in charge”. While Becca appreciated their bluntness, she felt that her fear was going to make matters worse for herself. She had to “toughen up” and joked that she told herself to stop being a “p\*ss\*”. The boys interacted with the space through aggression and confidence and these strategies were quite successful because they paddled rapids without swimming or getting into any trouble. Casey (1996) claims that geographies can hold characteristics of human occupants. An example of this is seen in the attitudes boys were displaying about the river not being “understanding” and “forgiving”, aspects often associated with femininity, but rather a

dominating force so in reflection the boys acted dominating through their performance of masculinity.

The next few times Becca went whitewater kayaking the same interactions and emphasis on more masculine features of the place occurred. She may have paddled different rivers from the Yankee Jim Canyon to the Gallatin River to the Madison, but rituals that she did while paddling and the way she paddled whitewater remained the same because they were all a similar sportscape. While on a river trip that inspired her to want to try kayaking, she did not understand certain terminology and told me that her boyfriend would quickly correct her explaining the ways of being on the river or in whitewater works. She corrected her boyfriend in turn sometimes on how not to be an obnoxious boyfriend. This further illustrates how these spaces are created to be perceived as masculine.

While Becca was “initially scared in a new space,” as she tells it, this was because she did “not understand the river, but soon this became a place I acquainted with my identity and one I fell in love with”. Even though she swam on her her maiden voyage and had to do a booty beer—a whitewater tradition where a paddler drinks a beer out of their neoprene booty--she found that she was more daring than before. Becca started whitewater paddling regularly and with each time found herself mindlessly getting ready to paddle rather than pacing across the parking lot and looking the whitewater multiple times before she felt ready to go kayak. Becca hollered with excitement as each wave crashed down on her, swam with a smile when she would flip over and not successfully roll, cooled off with a crisp PBR in flat water sections of the river, and would do a booty beer for the fun of it after a swim, followed by a low but loud burp.



Becca doing a “booty beer” after swimming on her maiden voyage kayaking.

### The rules of the park

Becca’s experience on the river illustrates how women new to the sport are introduced to sportscares. Once acquainted with the ways the spaces work, it is important to interact with these spaces in the correct way to seem authentic. Appearing “authentic” signals that someone is a part of the community and makes it easier to connect with others in those spaces. I was told countless examples of how people can identify a novice to the sport. It was explained to me that just because someone dresses a certain way and wears the right brands does not mean they are an authentic part of the community. Those who would wear certain skate or ski brands were often labelled as “posers” if they did not also know how to be in the space. But authentic ways of being in these spaces are deeply entwined with masculine ways of behaving. As I show in this section, the result is a masculinized space that persists even with the presence of women.

### *Wheels and tutus*

Livingston skatepark is where many of my Bozeman friends learned how to skateboard. The skatepark has different features that are friendly to all levels of skateboarding. It is located next to an elementary school which would often mean there were a plentitude of kids rolling

around the park after school hours. My friends would try to watch their language because of the young kids and parents but often lost their tempers after colliding with a kid running loose on their metal razor scooter.

While Livingston skatepark can be chaotic, it was the preferred place to learn because it included a pump track, a looped sequence of rollers used to learn pumping-- maintaining forward momentum by pumping one's legs rather than pushing, a basic skate concept. Pump tracks are great features to learn on because they do not require a person to drop into anything steep. While there are other skateparks in the area—notably the Bozeman skatepark—this is where the women's skate group would host skate sessions and mini clinics. The all women's skate group called the "The Darling Shred" is a group whose goal is to make skating more accessible for women in the Bozeman area. Many of the women skateboarders told me they preferred to skate here with their girlfriends because it felt less intimidating and was sometimes less crowded. The few times I went to Livingston with my girl skater friends, I saw other groups of girl skaters, not a common sight at many other skateparks.

Alex is a classic example of a women who does it all in terms of extreme sports. She can be found taking advantage of the climbing, skiing, kayaking, and skateboarding that the greater area of Bozeman has to offer. I first formally met her while whitewater kayaking on the Gallatin River and soon after realized I recognized her short curls and goofy smile from Livingston skatepark. One day I asked how she felt the culture at Livingston compared to others in the area. She explained that although she often went to Livingston skatepark over other skateparks because she felt more comfortable there, that Livingston "skatepark still gives me thrill and fear". Lastly, she added that although she was more comfortable skateboarding at Livingston skatepark that there were still certain "rules" of how to act in the space.

*When Alex was first struggling to learn to skateboard at Livingston, she caught her eyes following Sasha with her black helmet and bleached blonde ponytail. Sasha was older and while she had only been skating for a year and half, she soared around the Livingston pump track with style and confidence. This gave Alex hope that she too would soon be able to float with ease around the skatepark. While Alex did not actively skateboard with Sasha, she viewed her as a friendly acquaintance. Sasha would often “subtly” encourage Alex by showing interest in her skateboarding goals or complimenting her tie dye t-shirt which made Alex feel more comfortable. Alex admired about Sasha, but the “coolness” and “certain confidence” she held at the skatepark simultaneously intimidated her .*

*Alex had been skating for a couple months when she rolled up to the skatepark to find Sasha wheeling around the skatepark dressed in a bright pink and orange tutu dress with sparkles. Alex could not stop staring. The men that Alex was with rolled their eyes. It was like “wearing a bikini to dinner with your grandparents,” she recalled. While Sasha had been someone that Alex had previously respected, she found herself feeling embarrassed for Sasha and began to avoid her at the skatepark.*

*However, as Alex was wheeling around the skatepark she saw Sasha skating with the same coolness and began to feel guilty for so harshly judging Sasha and avoiding her just because the boys labelled her attire as “obnoxious” and “try hard.” Alex went over to compliment Sasha on her tutu. Sasha giggled and explained that she was doing a college photography project on being girl in male dominated spaces. She felt that the most antithetical thing to the skate park would probably be a tutu, an outright illustration of femininity. After hearing this, Alex felt embarrassed for being so judgmental. She had in the past felt unwelcome*

*for being a woman in this space and had briefly continued that norm by thinking that Sasha wearing a blatantly “girly” clothing was “attention seeking” and “obnoxious”.*

Overtly feminine expressions are seen as an affront to the rules of the park. While Sasha was able to confront these rules with her tutu, her clear expression of femininity did not transform the space into being less masculine. Instead, for Alex the blatant expression of femineity made masculinity of the space more obvious. The population at the Livingston skatepark that day and the current, more diverse skateboarding community does not change the history of the sport and implications of being at a skatepark. As discussed by Casey (1991), these spaces are more than physical spaces but also historical spaces meaning that the histories influence how the space is perceived by others and therefore how people conduct themselves in these spaces. Skateboarding still holds an element of rebellion and danger which are traits that are not associated with femininity (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009). Certain traits of the sport being gendered made the sport masculine which as a result made the constructed sportsapes also masculine even when women were present.





Livingston skate park located in Livingston, Montana empty at sunrise.

*Keeping it tough in the terrain park*

Lily grew up skiing mainly with a trio of girls who included herself, her older sister Kylie, and their shared friend Hayden, who was Kylie's age. While Kylie and Hayden were 3 years older than Lily, during the months of December, January, February and March, this trio could always be found doing terrain park laps at their local ski resort. Terrain parks have jumps, rails, boxes, and jibs, which are all features that a skier or snowboarder could play off while skiing or riding, adding an impressive "trick" element to the respective snow sports. Lily loved hitting rails and was one of the only women I came to know personally who could hit rails well. Unsuccessfully hitting a rail could result in bruises or a broken collar bone. From getting big air from ski jumps, attempting to do different tricks in the air, or sliding on metal rails, the terrain lent it itself to crashing, breaking bones making it a risky space. As Lily said, "you can't be afraid to eat sh\*t when you ski park".

While female participation in park skiing has grown since Lily lived at home, women are still outnumbered in this part of the mountain. Lily felt it was her group's ability to "fit in with the boys"—easily adopting the masculine way of dressing and mannerisms—that made the terrain park less intimidating for them. "People always told me the way I walk reminds them of Danny DeVito" she replied with a laugh when I asked if others thought she was masculine. Lily reflected on how the trio of women would often buy boy's ski attire because it looked better and made her personally feel more comfortable. The bulkiness of ski gear can obscure gendered bodies, but gender is often coded through color (Stoddart 2011). Lily, like many of the other women skiers I spoke to, tried to avoid wearing clothing that could mark them as women.

Lily and her friends felt that they belong in the terrain park because they embodied “park rats”—a term used to refer to people who only spend the day at the terrain park on the mountain—just as well as the boys. While Alex did not recognize the skatepark as masculine until Sasha’s tutu forced her to confront the unspoken park rules, Lily—a self-identified tomboy—embraced the terrain park as a masculine space. “There were a reason people called me a butch in middle school,” she reported. In the terrain park, however, she felt comfortable embodying more masculine ways because the space encouraged and in many ways required a person to act more masculine.

### Outside Outsiders

*Luna and Molly sit in an eddy watching as the four men with whom they were paddling continue to surf the same wave upstream. They had been waiting nearly 10 minutes. While Molly was having a great time with Luna, she could not help feeling annoyed at the men who accompanied her. “Yes” it was one of her first times whitewater kayaking, and “yes” she understands that she should not continue down river alone in case she flips over and swims. However, this did not diminish the fact she wanted to keep paddling down the rapids because they were fun and so she could escape from these obnoxious men.*

*Molly and Luna were friends and had always enjoyed participating in activities outdoors together. Luna was a big whitewater kayaker ever since her boyfriend Caleb had introduced her to the sport. Molly had dabbled in kayaking before and went to a couple of pool sessions during the previous winter, but never identified as a kayaker because she found whitewater intimidating. But this summer she had decided to give it a second chance.*

*After paddling an easier section of Class II and some Class III whitewater with Luna a few times, Molly wanted to try the tougher lower section of the river. Here, the river consisted*

mostly of Class III rapids and one Class IV, but these were now well within her skill level. Luna excitedly told Molly to join her the next day with her boyfriend and some of his friends. Molly exited her car that afternoon somewhat nervous but excited to try this new section of whitewater. She parks next to Luna and Caleb, and before she even says 'hello' to introduce herself, Caleb asks her "so have you paddled this before because it is a tough place to learn." Molly coolly responded that she felt she was capable and explained that if she did swim, she would be fine. "Well, it is a rough place for a swim" chimed in one of Caleb's friends, "do you have roll because that will help." She told them she had a semi-consistent combat roll to which Caleb replied with a chuckle, "this will be fun." Luna reassured her, and they paddled down river.

Throughout the entire run of the whitewater section, the men explained to Molly where to head on the river and how she should run each rapid. While she wanted some guidance, she resented being treated like a "dumb girl who knows nothing." Molly felt they were trying to make her feel as nervous as possible in this space. She was infuriated by their patronizing language and was angered that they were being so unwelcoming to her paddling this lower section.

She still felt that her every move was being analyzed by the other men in the group. "I wouldn't go there in the river next time," one of the boys told her after she successfully ran a section, and then ended by telling her she "got lucky because usually you would get chundered by going there." She could not help but smirk then and feel proud of herself for how she paddled the lower section of the river without swimming and with ease. Toward the end of the run, one of the boys told her she did a "good job and should join them next week." Molly did not join them the following week but found new people with whom to paddle who made her feel comfortable in that space.

Molly was told by men how to act and where to be in the river. While this could be helpful at times to avoid obstacles and help her paddle the section without trouble, she was told to “wait” in specific spaces and no one explained how to move in the space. In addition, Molly’s ability was questioned, therefore fostering a sense that this place was unwelcoming. Through their questioning, the men also demonstrated doubt about Luna’s judgment of Molly’s readiness for this more difficult whitewater section. Together the men determined the rules of the space through telling Molly where to be within the space, questioning Molly’s ability, and doubting Luna’s discretion, making the space unwelcoming to Molly, a woman, who was trying to navigate through this new place.

While Molly advises that they were “not intentionally trying to be assholes”, the men’s words and ways of controlling the space created barriers to Molly’s participation and desire to improve her skills. Molly wondered if she were a man would they have given her as hard a time. She felt there was a dominance of masculinity in the space, which influenced the way the men of the group treated her, requiring her to prove whether she was good enough to paddle this section. Although she was successful her first time paddling the harder section, she admitted she often felt like she does not belong there. These barriers to extreme sportsapes are often created for women, making it more difficult for them to be in these spaces.

## Conclusion

In her book, *Space, Place, and Gender*, the geographer Doreen Massey (1994) recounts going to the soccer fields when she was young and understanding that this was not a place for her but rather a place for boys. While they were simply fields, there were values that sports are for men, making the fields masculine (Massey 1994). As with Massey’s soccer fields, the rivers,

mountains, and skateparks that form these extreme sportsapes are not only social constructions, but socially constructed *gendered* places. The rules of engagement within these extreme sportsapes have long been defined, redefined, and reinforced by men. While these spaces are they are neither fixed nor unchanging, these histories of masculinity continue to shape both the spaces and the norms and expectations within them.

It is through this ongoing social construction that these spaces remain open to new forms of construction. For example, Lily's comfort in the terrain park brought her women friends into the space making a more comfortable spot for women than it was before. Those women would have not gone into the terrain park because they felt like they did not belong. However Lily pushed them to enter the space making it more accessible to more women. Women being within these spaces does alter them to be less masculine than before by the fact that there are not only women within these spaces. The more women that become a part of the legacies of these extreme sports the more normalized it will be for women to be in these spaces. When women occupy these masculine spaces, they make them more comfortable for other women to enter the masculine spaces which could encourage women to be not ashamed of femineity within these sportsapes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PINNCHIO SYNDROME

“What can I say I can relate to Pinocchio; I want to be a “real” part of the community which often feels like I need to be a “real boy”. I am a woman and pretending to be all masculine sometimes feels like a lie.”

-Nicki discussing her identity in skateboarding, skiing, and whitewater kayaking

*We stand around the fire chatting and listening to dead metal under the starlight sky in the middle of public lands outside of Missoula, Montana. There are about twenty of us, fourteen guys and six girls, mostly between the ages of 19 and 23. Most of the people are Bozeman transplants who had moved here for college, originally connecting at the skatepark. I had found my way here through my five roommates, three girls and two boys, who were part of this friend group. The group had decided to go on a weekend getaway out of Bozeman. Missoula was a convenient and familiar overnight spot for us. Most of the group had spent the day driving around various skateparks in the area, while a few friends and I had gone whitewater kayaking.*

*The sun hovered over the nearby hills as I put on a few extra puffy layers over my large black hoodie and traded in my flat brim hat for my beanie. I walked over to the fire where my friends had gathered to start cooking dinner. I sat on the ground in my black Carhart's with a piece of cardboard functioning as my camp chair. Eric used the extra pockets of his Carhartt's to carry extra Pabst Blue Ribbons and he tossed one to me. I cradled the can in my hands. Emma also carried beers in her Carhartt's pockets, cracked a beer, and came to sit next to me near the fire.*

*In the corner of my eye, I saw some of my friends eyeing the size of the fire and slowly backing up. “DO IT!” Emma yelled at Kate and with this sign of approval, Kate chugged the rest of her beer, crushed the can and jumped over the raging fire. There were cheers from all*

*sides and some “you’re an idiot” remarks to Kate too. “She’s not a pussy”, Emma said with a laugh chuckling slightly and nodding her head.*

Studies of women in extreme sports have often remarked on the use of dress to illustrate masculine gender performance in these spaces. Kate’s leap across the fire encapsulates the prescribed gender performance in these extreme sports spaces and shows how performances of masculinity include, but also extend beyond, modes of dress. The culture around extreme sports often values the idea of pushing limits of the sport, whether it is paddling a bigger waterfall or jumping off of a larger cliff on skis, leaving little room for caution (Stoddart 2011). This means that women are not as easily accepted or introduced into these extreme sport communities, continually perpetuating the idea that the culture and community are male created and dominated. So how do women learn and enjoy existing in these communities if the sport is dominated by and importunately values masculinity?

The example of Emma and Kate shows not only how women in these communities perform in ways that are more masculine, but also how these gendered performances extend beyond the mountains, rivers, and skateparks of the sports. As I show in this chapter, for many women masculine performance in extreme sports begins with dress but grows to encompass a much broader collection of masculine traits over time.

“A real boy”

*The wheels of Nicki’s skateboard slam the smooth, cold concrete as she flies into the bowl. Whshhhhh. Wind rushes through the holes of her black Protec helmet while her sweatshirt acts as a parachute. The feeling of pure adrenaline continues until Nicki leans slightly too far forward. Despite the cushioned knee pads—worn at her mother’s encouragement--her knees*

*slam hard on the concrete. Nicki turns to her friends and raises her board up into the air in celebration. It was her first time ever dropping into a bowl. "Dropping in," is when a skater goes from a flat platform to a steep transition. It is an essential part of the beginner skating progression, but one that can take a long time to master. As she walks up the slippery concrete bowl, a skater boy calls out, "Nice. You should try staying more balanced over your board though."*

*Suddenly, Nicki felt very exposed. She felt the boy drop in near her and felt him stare at her to see if she observed how to drop in. He again gestured his arms out as a way of asking if she saw him. Her face felt hot, and she simply nodded back at this boy. She did not try to drop in again that day but just watched other people skate while sitting on the park bench near the skatepark bowl. "This is just a part of skating and being a girl, I guess" she recounted with a tone of frustration.*

Women I spoke to consistently expressed that "sticking out" was the greatest struggle they faced as being outwardly identifying women in their sport. They felt the sport is so male dominated and centered around a masculine culture that simply *being* a woman participating in the sport makes them stand out. They especially feared receiving unsolicited tips from men like the one Nicki received that day. Other researchers have observed that women who are not yet great skaters are more likely to be labeled "posers" by men (Atencio et. al 2009). Even if they were not explicitly labeled as posers, women described how "sticking out" left them feeling like inauthentic members of the community.

The hyper visibility that women in extreme sports feel, especially when starting out, was acutely felt by Nicki. She had begun skating in 2019 at the same time as her cis-male friend Jake. From the start, she noticed how much harder it was for her to learn to skate than Jake. She and



Jake would venture to the skate park together to practice, and while Jake's mistakes went unnoticed, Nicki was regularly corrected. "Everybody had something to say about why I was not doing it correctly or was not successful or what I needed to do better," she related. Nicki would sometimes wake up around 6:30 a.m. just to get to the skate park before everyone else arrived so she could skate feeling relaxed and unjudged. Eventually she became more comfortable where she could skate at the skatepark without the feeling of constantly being watched; but still expressed frustration in feeling as though she were still singled out because she is a woman.

While it may have taken her longer than Jake to master the skills of skateboarding, Nicki was eventually able to find that sense of belonging within the skate community. So where does this transition occur from a woman's feeling like they "stick out" to feeling less exposed within the community? For Nicki it was a multitude of factors. She would skateboard with her boyfriend, who was already a strong skater and accepted within the skating community. Having this connection made it easier to meet other skaters who she could turn to for advice and who could shield her from getting "tips" from strangers.

Nicki also worked to create a new community at the skate park by inviting her female friends to join her. Bringing in more women, in turn, helped her to feel less exposed at the skatepark. "They were worse than me which made me feel less watched," she guiltily admitted. "I remember bringing my girlfriends to the skatepark and getting complimented more by the guys that I was skating well." Nicki joked that maybe they were just sucking up to her so that she would set some of "the boys" up with her friends. However, she, in part, noticed that this dynamic would happen more often when people had a way to directly compare her to other women.

Lastly, as Nicki spent more time in the park, she increasingly adopted many of the unspoken cultural norms. She understood the different metal bands, followed the right skaters on Instagram, and knew that a great way to make friends was by bringing a six-pack. Nicki learned how to “embrace the masculine,” an idea I define as when women embody stereotypical parts of masculinity, such as modes of dress, character traits like assertiveness and confidence, or ways of using their body as by pushing their personal physical limits in their sport. Nicki noticed this change in herself of embracing the masculine when she would slam into the hard concrete while skating. Rather than react to the pain, she learned to shake it off or proclaim, “that was fun.” This attitude not only made her feel more accepted, but also improved her skateboarding, giving her the courage to try new tricks or moves.

In many ways, Nicki’s journey to acceptance at the skatepark speaks to Atencio’s (2009: 5) observation that those who embody skatepark norms are more readily accepted into the skating community. In this way, embodiment of skating norms is a form of social capital. But these norms are also tied to outward expressions of masculinity such as dress, ways of talking, the amount a person is willing to take risks and overall confidence. “Boys,” like Jake come into these spaces already equipped with the masculine ways of being, facilitating their acceptance into the community. For Nicki, acquiring social capital took effort and time. To “stick out” less within this extreme sport setting, Nicki adapted to the more masculine modes of dress and behavior making her become less noticed. In addition, she was accepted by her boyfriend who was a part of the skating community, making her stick out even less.



Nicki skateboards in a bowl at a skatepark in Big Sky, Montana.

## Fitting In(ish)

*Two tiny pieces of brown hair protrude on both sides of Lily's head from under her goggles. With the volume of ski gear, these "slut strands" are the only thing that portray Lily's gender. We come to a fast stop at the rickety two-person chair lift, our snow spraying behind us. There is no line, so we pull ourselves with ski poles towards the loading zone for the chair lift. As we stand in the loading zone ready to sit back into the chair, the lift attendant asks us in a deep voice "how are dudes doing?" I respond, "just ripping this fresh pow on the left" as we hop on the chair and ride up. He yells after us, "sh\*t you guys' rip." Lily looks at me and chuckles saying, "He totally thought we were guys; guess we need to pull out the slut strands more." I laugh reflecting on the lift attendant's surprised reaction to my thick female timbre.*

During the winter of 2021, Lily and I would head up to Big Sky ski resort about three times a week in her 2002 Ford Ranger. Lily grew up ditching class to be at her local hill and was a skilled freestyle skier. Freestyle skiing incorporates park skiing, hitting rails, and going off jumps, but also skiing big lines on steep slopes. When I skied with Lily, I improved by watching,

following, and mimicking her. She would float through trees and leap off rocks, leaving a white powder spray following her like a cloud of smoke that trails an airplane. I did my best to follow her lines and imitate her body movements. Lily fit into the ski community where I so desperately wanted to be accepted.

The next day we headed up to the mountain ready to take advantage of fresh snow that had fallen overnight. Lily was unusually quiet on this ride up the mountain. She looked at me with a frown and said, “Matt doesn't want to ski with me because he just wants to be with the boys.” Matt, Lily’s boyfriend of eight months, was also a snowboarder. She was excited to ski with him but figured she “wasn’t cool enough for him”.

*Lily’s dusty black and grey Ford Ranger creaks to a stop next to Matt’s black Ford F-150. Matt stands outside his car with three other boys, beers in hand and smiles of mischief. Lily rolls down the window to talk to the boys. After a bit of casual banter Caleb says “okay see you guys later. We are gonna go rip”. He picks up his snowboard, stuffs a few more beers in his pockets and leaves with the other boys.*

While it is hard to know whether Lily and I were intentionally outcasted by Matt and his friends because we were women, it felt like that to Lily. It was clear that she was a very advanced skier and could have easily skied with anybody, but she felt her inherent femininity made her an outsider. The feeling of satisfaction from being misidentified as a boy was now all washed away by her exclusion from skiing with Matt. I consoled her and told her it was my fault that he did not want to ski with her, but she was certain that my presence would not change the fact that he did only want to ski with “the boys.”

Feelings of exclusion are a constant for women in extreme sports. Wheaton (2004) observes that gender conditions “membership” within skateboarding and other lifestyle sport

communities. Rather than simple binary categories of insider/outsider, membership exists along a spectrum with men considered to be more definite members of the community than women. This spectrum of membership continues. Women who adopt more masculine gender performance are more definite members of the extreme sport community than those whose gender performance is more feminine. Sjsord's (2009) similarly found that women snowboarders felt pressure to be 'one of the boys' in order to gain membership into the snowboard community.

It is not surprising then that many women feel a sense of pride when grouped as "one of the boys." It is a recognition of her technical prowess, style, and authenticity. While dressing a certain way contributes to fitting in, the way one dresses is not the only aspect that makes a woman feel as though she is part of the community. Having good relationships with other men in the community also is a sign that a woman fits in. The dominant population is men so if women are friends with men and not just women, it means that they are a strong part of the community.

For Lily and me, it was not our technical skills that kept us from being invited to ski with "the boys," but our inability to fit into the group dynamic. First, no one could openly make a sexist joke or say demeaning comments about women if Lily and I were present. This dynamic is a common scenario among women in extreme sports where men may make an objectifying comment about women and women are unsure whether they should retort because it could result in their being rejected by people within the group and not invited to participate in the sport with an "in" group. In addition, women are assumed in these extreme sports to not take the same risks as men in group settings. Many women expressed in individual and group interviews that men automatically perceived women as less capable. In all these sports, women are expected to perform naturally worse than men, whether it is because they do not "send things as hard" meaning they are not taking as many risks within these spaces as men, or some other supposition

about a women's ability to perform in these spaces. Hypothetical examples mentioned by women were not launching off the larger waterfalls, not completing as many ski tricks off a cliff or not dropping in from as extreme heights in skateparks. The women postulated that maybe men do better because they are expected to do better, and that as a result the culture is easier for men to be a part of than for women.

Nicki was able to use masculine gender performance to mitigate feelings of hypervisibility and to facilitate her acceptance into the skateboarding community. This masculine gender performance ultimately helped her to improve her skills, further securing her membership in the group. But Lily's experience highlights how skill and masculine performance is not always enough, and women's membership in the sport's community remains contingent.



Lily poses for the camera while skiing at the Big Sky Ski Resort.

“It’s a lifestyle”

Membership in extreme sports communities is about more than just gender. Being viewed as authentic is integral to being accepted into these communities. Donnelly (2006) writes that

participants within the snow sports value being an “authentic” part of the community because being inauthentic or a “poser” participant results in being ignored and devalued. Extreme sports are also referred to as “lifestyle sports,” an umbrella term used to encapsulate a variety of thrill-seeking sports outside of partaking in the physical activity (Wheaton 2004). In group interviews, women shared how their sport becomes a part of their identity because there is so much more to skiing, whitewater kayaking and skateboarding outside of the actual participation in the sport. Most women felt as though they needed to fully “invest” in the sport to participate, meaning watching videos of their sport, supporting authentic extreme sport-oriented clothing brands, and following sponsored athletes on social media.

As women are less definite members of these extreme sports communities, they require more investment to secure their membership. Women and men speak about “investment” in the sport to demonstrate their authenticity. Authenticity would be someone who keeps trying to improve in the sport and adapts to the lifestyle and community. Many women, like Nicki’s embracing more masculine gender performances, helped her to bond with other people in their sport. The women expressed during group interviews that all the brands, videos and athletes they followed outside of the sport embraced the masculine identity and taking large risks in the sport and life.

Meg is one of the leading women in the skate community in Bozeman, so it surprised me to learn that she only started skating four years ago during her first year of college. She started skateboarding because she would hang out with her boyfriend and his friends in a basement where all the boys would skateboard on a mini ramp. She would watch her boyfriend and all his male friends launch down onto the wooden ramp. She was mesmerized by the satisfying “boom” sound that would echo throughout the dark basement and the grinding of the underside of the

boards across the PVC pipe on the ends of the ramp. So, after watching the boys skate the ramp, she eventually decided she wanted to learn to how to skate the ramp too.

*After a couple of weeks of skateboarding in the basement, Meg was hooked, and she began spending significant time with guys as she worked to improve her skills. She invested in buying a skateboard, helmet, and pads (although some of the boys insisted she did not need protective gear) and spent a couple hours each day at the mini ramp for weeks pumping, learning new tricks and falling on the mini ramp. Meg's boyfriend and his friends were guides for Meg into the skate culture, informing her not only of different tricks, but also introducing her to different types of music such as heavy metal and other aspects of the culture. Casually skating with the boys led to causally hanging out, which eventually led to friendship. By hanging out with them she became influenced by their masculine mannerisms because they were all boys. Embracing the boys' interests facilitated her enjoying skateboarding even more. The more she got to know them and invest in being their friends, the more she wanted to spend time skateboarding with them. Meg today says she could not imagine her life without listening to heavy metal music—a genre known to be aggressive, and whose primary audience is men.*

*Meg recalls that one time after a long session of skating and drinking a case of Modelo, everyone was highly “stoked.” Her friend Max told everyone, “Tonight was the night” and he quickly ran to his car. She had no idea what he was referring to and was more focused on the fact she had finally mastered a hard trick, the kick flip. Max walked back in with 12 full cans of spray paint and a ski mask where you could only see his eyes and mouth. Everyone chuckled a bit, excited about the prospect of “tagging” some new places. “Tagging” is a type of graffiti where a person has certain words or a sign that represent their artwork. “You wanna come?” they asked Meg. Images of the cop lights flashing behind her while she ran away played in the*



*back of her mind, but she did not want to seem afraid. She said “yes” and did not look back. Meg told me she never imagined herself venturing out in the middle of the night to graffiti public spaces, but that her investment in the culture made her see the importance of engaging in such risky activities. She said that she felt her participation in illegal activity gave her the ability to bond with the boys who skated and be viewed as an authentic “legitimate skater,” even though the activity was not related to the physical act of skateboarding. Although the night activities may have been outside of Meg’s comfort zone, she reflected that “it was one of the most fun nights I had that year.”*

This bonding was a positive experience not only because Meg had fun but also because it demonstrated that she had carved her own space within this group of boy skateboarders. This experience cemented a unique relationship between her and the other boys that was outside of skateboarding and her boyfriend. Women often never feel completely comfortable in the male dominated spaces because they do not connect with others in the sportscapes. Going to a skatepark is partially very intimidating because it is a public space with people who could be complete strangers watching a person skateboard. There are unwritten rules about who can drop in and how to navigate the skatepark space until an individual messes up navigating the space and is quickly corrected, but generally not in a pleasant way.

When she first started skateboarding, Meg was told by one her boyfriend’s friends that “it is more than skating. It is a lifestyle.” Skateboarding started to encapsulate part of her identity as she became more invested in the sport and the culture around skateboarding leaked into other parts of her life, such as the way she dressed, the music she listened to and her more rebellious attitude towards the world. While she embraced this part of herself, she understood that these aspects of skateboarding kept many of her women friends from trying out skateboarding.

For women, having a supportive community makes continued participation much easier, but building that supportive community can take substantial time and effort. Therefore, participating in the sport with other women can facilitate navigating the culture and keep women involved in the sport. Meg understood this scenario, so she ended up creating an all-women skate group in Bozeman because she wanted her friends and other women to have an easier entrance to skateboarding than she did.

Meg admits that while she does enjoy teaching other women, it is hard to let go of the desire for male validation. She reported that “women sometimes compete for the validation of males because they are better or know the sport better.” But as she has these thoughts, she is actively working to disrupt this pattern. “This dynamic exists which is why I in part created an all-women skate group where we can have control of the culture”.



A woman and man bonding over beverages while on the river.

### Women in action: being extreme in all realms

*It was a smokey mid-July day in Bozeman, Montana when I went to my friend Adam’s backyard for a non-binary and woman skate clinic with the group Meg had started. There were*

*about 12 girls of which four had clearly skated before, but the dynamics were much the same as any other skate group. In the middle of the session, one of the women noticed that we had run out of beer and quickly ran to the gas station to buy another case because “she could not do this sh\*t without being a little drunk”. We listened to hard rock while pumping up and down the mini-ramp, and other than being slightly more comfortable because there was no male gaze, everything felt culturally the same. In other words, women had carved out space, but all the culture remained dominantly masculine.*

Meg started this non-binary and women skate group which has a few core members who host mini ramp sessions and skate trips. The group started in the winter of 2019 and has taught around 40 women in Bozeman how to skateboard. While this group fosters a space for beginners to join the sport, the group still values the masculine culture of skateboarding and has embodied creating a space for women within this masculine culture.

While women often embody these masculine traits while skiing, skateboarding, or whitewater kayaking, these masculine appearances appear in areas outside the physical practice of the sport. This embodiment of masculinity for many women helps them overcome the fear associated with these sports. While many women recognize problems within the cultures of these sports, they often struggle to find ways to create a more inclusive space and—by their own admission—find themselves adhering to the toxic parts of the culture. Throughout various interviews women would point out how some collectives of women made women feel more excluded from the community rather than included to the women doing hypermasculine performances. “These women would only ski with each other or boys and always asked me what I could ski,” said Delaney to me in an interview. Delaney recalled a time she ran into the group of women in the ski collective, complimented their videos and offered to go skiing some time.

They in return asked if she had any videos of herself skiing which made Delaney feel as though she had to “prove” herself just like she had to with men in the sport.

Social media has become increasingly important within these sports communities. Social media is important for gaining sponsorship from ski brands, which can range from obtaining discounts on gear to direct compensation. Most people who are sponsored will receive some free or very discounted gear from the company in return for marketing the companies on their social media. Those with sponsorships, as well as those seeking to gain them, will create video content or host gatherings for the public. These are generally group, rather than individual ventures. Sometimes referred to as collectives or crews, there are many of these groups within extreme sports. Extreme sports culture is often formed around these groups, their gatherings, and the videos they post on social media. These group collectives have traditionally been composed of cis males, but women have increasingly formed their own independent groups. These groups create social dynamics within these different cultures as well as encourage people to “get after it.” These groups are often started for fun but sometimes evolve into gaining sponsorships.

Whether the collectives are all men or all female, they function in similar ways. In kayaking there is an all-boy kayaking group named “Team Weiner.” These boys post videos from their adventures, which range from a member going off 20-meter waterfalls in a kayak to destroying furniture at a party. Similarly, “Team Titez,” a female version of the kayak collective, posts highlight videos of themselves launching off large waterfalls and illustrating their advanced skill in the sport. While these women are empowering and illustrate that women are a part of kayaking, they also further promote masculinity by subscribing to parts of the masculine culture while separating themselves from men in the sports. The Team Titez videos only highlight very advanced women kayakers going down advanced terrain; and while the video

footage is not as aggressive as their male counterpoint group's video footage, the videos illustrate a certain "tough" factor by featuring clips of the women drinking booty beers (drinking a beer out of a neoprene booty) and them flicking off the camera. Simply creating an all women group within these sports does not mean the messaging within the videos is completely different from that produced by all-male groups. The masculine culture of extreme sports still shines through in these all women spaces.

Even within inclusive open groups, women still strive to perform the masculine. Klein and Weaving (2016) examine how many all-female backcountry ski groups have formed in response to an increase in female participation in backcountry skiing. They note that the goal of these groups is to create space for women within the culture but not change the masculine culture itself (Klein and Weaving 2016). [Refer back to Meg's group?] As discussed in a previous chapter, women prescribe to the masculine culture to be part of the community and the same goes for many all-women extreme sports collectives. They want to be viewed as legitimate by the larger community so they can feel encouraged to continue with their respective extreme sports.

In general, while the messaging of all women groups may assume to be more focused on aspects of femininity such as focusing on rhetoric like "ski like a girl" or "women are powerful", the dominate themes of extreme sports, such as taking risks, are still present in all women groups. The culture being masculine affects women to be more masculine even within all female spaces.



Girl shotguns beer before taking lap on the Gallatin to go whitewater kayaking.

### Perks of being a “tomboy”

*With a Modelo in one hand and power drill in the other, Lily sits watching the sunset's colors radiate onto her freshly built mini ramp. She grabs her skateboard, takes off her beanie, ties her deep brown hair into a high ponytail with her hardened hands and begins to impress me by doing the simplest things with her skateboard. Five minutes into us laughing while I clumsily attempt to skate with encouragement from Lily, Lily decides to drop in again and try a new trick on the half pipe. “Dropping in” is when a person goes to the top of the half pipe structure and launches themselves down into the u-shape ramp. While it may seem simple, this act has resulted in many bruises on my legs and arms, and once on my face. I watch her as she drops in without fear and with ease as if this were an act of zero consequence. “How do you not have any fear when doing that?” I blurt out. She stops skating dead in her tracks, “I am always afraid when I drop in, but it is a matter of doing it more and getting used to slamming into the hard cement or wood that makes it easier.” I chuckle and respond, “So you are saying the more you get hurt, the less scared you become.” She looks at me puzzled and says nothing for a few*

*moments so we only hear Gene Ween belt the lyrics “you can piss up a rope and watch the “pissy dribble” coming from the speakers.” Finally, my focus darts back to Lily as she states plainly, “It is more that I force myself to try, which is something most girls don’t do.”*

Unlike many of the stories mentioned previously, Lily found skateboarding to be a place where she finally fit in. She independently decided to stray from the more traditional route of activities and spent her free time skateboarding. While this independent path mindset may seem admirable and “rad” by an outsider such as myself, one can still forget the universality of the cliquishness and group-think mentality of high school. Most of Lily’s friends were “older, stoner boys” who took her under their wings and made her feel not like an outsider. She would go to the skatepark with them and felt welcomed in this space since it was full of her friends and their friends. She enjoyed activities such as skiing so she decided to try skateboarding. As she started to skate more, she also drifted farther away from caring about the social rules of high school and became more independent of the high school social scene. She was no longer emotionally bruised as much by the mean words of her peers but externally bruised from the hits she took skating. Getting hurt was a part of skating which was not an idea that was unfamiliar to Lily. She grew up dirt biking, skiing parks, and mountain biking which all involved lots of bruises and broken bones. “I eventually grew tolerant of getting hurt and early exposure made it a norm to me. Slamming when I skate is not something I am afraid of because it is a part of the sport.” “Slamming” is the act a person’s falling hard onto the ground while skating. The idea of breaking a bone or getting concussed never deterred Lily from skating or skiing park, which fearlessness is a trait I envied.

As mentioned in chapter 3, Lily was often labelled “butch” in late middle school and early high school which contributed to her separation from the typical high school activities.

She has always identified as a “tom boy” in the sense of the way she dresses, talks and what she does in her free time. The idea of wearing baggy clothing may not specifically be gendered, but for women this dress often goes along with hiding the parts of our body that make us feminine and it nullifies femaleness. In fact, many women see the parts of themselves that are female as characteristics that hold them back from improving in their extreme sport. For Lily she had always just dressed more like a boy, which in terms of the skatepark made her seem like she was already a part of the community.

Extreme sports are often highly individualistic; therefore, many times participants are those who have been cast aside as outsiders (Malterud et al., 2021). Lily has stated that she just thinks it is easier for her to take risks “because of the way [Lily] is,” referring to the more masculine traits of herself. She has specifically noted that “she has balls” and does not fear getting hurt. References to masculine parts are viewed as admirable compliments within extreme sports because the more one risks, the more they can perform to higher standards in the sport.

In many ways skiing and skateboarding allowed Lily to escape the bounds of femininity, but through still identifying as a women, made skateboarding a more accessible outlet for other women such as myself. There are people who look at whitewater kayaking, skateboarding, and skiing that feel so far removed from these sports because they do not identify with the community or mindset behind the sport: risk. The strong association among risk, extreme sports, and masculinity is why these sports have historically attracted mostly men, making the culture build upon itself to be masculine. However, there are certain women like Lily who have felt excluded from groups of women and found community in these masculine communities. Lily was someone who made me feel more welcome in skateboarding and was a “guide into the community.”



## Conclusion

Male dominance within extreme sports shapes gender performance in myriad ways. Performing in more masculine ways mitigates feelings of hypervisibility, while also helping to build connections to established members of the community. More than simply fitting in, masculine performance can also help build competence in the sport by helping women to channel risk. This was most clear in how both Nicki and Lily talked about overcoming their fears while skateboarding. While women recognize and reflect on their own actions within these spaces, they emphasize that they do not perform for men. Instead, these masculine performances emerge in more unspoken ways.

While in this chapter I focus on why women perform the masculine, I look at more specifically what has led to so many women performing the masculine. Some women found that this transition to acting more masculine is due to masculine culture of extreme sports and wanting to fit into the community. While other women felt that they have always been a bit more masculine which is why they gravitated towards these sports. Women tend to “stick out” more than men due to the male dominated population so acting more masculine makes women fit in. In addition, women must invest in this masculine culture so they can be authentic members of the community, and so they are not ultimately gatekept from participation and feeling welcome in these spaces. While some women such as Lily are more conditioned to be masculine and found extreme sports as a validating outlet, other women find it difficult to conform to the masculine culture.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE GLITTERIZATION OF EXTREME SPORTS

In chapter three, I showed how male dominance within extreme sports, as well as the emphasis on danger and risk, produces masculine sportscapes. For many women, these masculine sportscapes have remained difficult to penetrate, continuing to limit women's participations in extreme sports more broadly. In chapter four, I illustrated how women within extreme sports leverage masculine gender performance to gain entry into these hypermasculine communities. While the landscape and culture of extreme sports may still be overwhelmingly masculine, they are by no means unchanged by women. In this chapter, I look at some of the ways women have transformed the sport to be more inclusive by being guides to other women, making statements in clothing, and creating all women skate, ski, and kayak groups.

### Guides into the sport

Brymer states that in extreme sports "authentic subcultural participation is consistently defined in ways associated with masculinity," meaning that to be a true part of the culture one must embrace masculine elements of extreme sports such as risk (Brymer 2010: 223). Like Brymer, Atencio writes that women typically were welcomed into the skate community "after being mentored by a male 'insider'" (Atencio 2006: 13). This scenario was the case for Nicki, whose boyfriend was her guide into learning how to skateboard, and Luna, who began kayaking with her boyfriend. The consequence is that men continue to be the ones who determine the rules of these cultures and be the leading forces within these cultures.

In focusing on the role of men in bringing women into these sports, scholars have often failed to acknowledge the role that these women take on as "guides" to other women into the sport. After feeling lonely because she was many times the only woman in a group of men, Nicki introduced her woman friends to skateboarding. Nicki was seen as an authentic member because

she understood the cultural norms and was committed to the sport, so she felt confident enough to now introduce more women into the sport. Although she sometimes had an instinct to be competitive with her friends, she wanted them to feel welcomed into the skate community rather than intimidated by it, so Nicki would encourage her friends to continue to keep trying even if they were making slow progress or felt judged at the skatepark by others. A similar scenario is found in Luna who was introduced to kayaking by her boyfriend and then in turn encouraged Molly to pick up the sport again and to try a harder section of the river.

There are people who look at whitewater kayaking, skateboarding, and skiing and feel so far removed from these sports because they do not identify with the community or mindset behind the sport: risk. The strong association among risk, extreme sports, and masculinity is why these sports have historically attracted mostly men making the culture build upon itself to be masculine. However, there are certain women like Lily who have felt excluded from groups of women and found community in these communities. However, Lily, was someone who made me feel more welcome in skateboarding and was a “guide into the community.” I never would have tried skateboarding until Lily begged me one day to try it. She encouraged me to keep trying, celebrated all my accomplishments along the way and told me to " ignore everyone else and focus on having fun”.

### Sparkles and slut strands

As I showed in chapter four, women often use clothes to downplay their gender and assert their belonging within these sports communities. While baggy clothes and opting for non-feminine colors are common, women have made these spaces more welcoming to women by embracing feminine modes of dress while involved in the sport. As I discussed in Chapter three,

Sasha's tutu helped Nicki realize how masculine the skatepark was and forced her to confront her assumptions about what are the "correct" clothes to wear at the skatepark. She realized it should not matter that Sasha's wearing a tutu made her stand out because it was that attitude that others had towards her that originally made her feel unwelcome to the community.

For women skiers, slut strands highlight femininity which is often hidden beneath layers of bulky gear. This expression of female identity known as slut strands is a way of creating space within the male environment. By sticking out purposefully in a way that indicates femininity, especially when it is so easy to be undetected as female underneath all the layers of ski gear, it points out that women are in these sports and are participating as much as men.

I was told by an informant that "having my [her] strands while skiing is like wearing earrings." It is a subtle expression that the person is a girl and wants to be recognized as a girl. Boys will sometimes also wear slut strands making it not as clear of a definer whether the person is a girl under their ski gear. However, this tradition was started by women to show their pride for having all their hair stuff under their helmets. Within the culture, slut strands are a symbol of femininity. Recognition of womanhood is empowering because it illustrates that women have power to influence these spaces as much as men even within a hypermasculine culture. Wearing slut strands while skiing is a way to feel "pretty" and ski challenging ski lines. It is a way of showing that femininity and adventurous activities such as free skiing are not mutually exclusive.

The idea of wearing slut strands while doing outdoor activities has turned into a society called "Slut Strand Society." Women's reflections on their decision to wear slut strands reveals the pride that women have within a culture that constantly undermines femininity:

*"because it is my way of showing support for a community and movement that is bigger than me."*

\*\*

*“because I can look hot AND be badass! I used to struggle with whether I could be a ‘tough cool girl’ or a ‘cute girl’. Someone very special told me & still tells me every day:*

*“you can literally do whatever the fuck you want.”*

\*\*

*“We do not have to fit who we are into these perfectly defined boxes that we put people in.”*

Normally women try to mask the feminine aspects of themselves to appear as authentic parts of the sport. But here women show that they can be feminine individuals who also ski and do not have to morph into acting like boys. This example of gender performance shows the transformation of femininity being more accepted within these hypermasculine cultures.

At my first whitewater kayak race, I noticed that almost all the participants sported sparkles on their cheeks. I later learned that in whitewater kayaking women often wear sparkles during races. This action is also an outwardly visible expression of femininity because it is put on one of the parts of your body that is distinguishable while kayaking since your legs are tucked into the kayak. While men have coopted this tradition and sometimes wear sparkles while racing, this tradition was started by women. At one of the races I attended, a group of women who kayak regularly together were all wearing sparkles and made sure to offer sparkles to the other women who were racing. Many of them were strangers to each other but all put sparkles on their cheeks while racing. This created a bond among all the women in feeling supported within the community. As one of the women who was racing told me, she “was able to be girly and kick ass in big scary rapids,” which was highlighted by wearing sparkles during the whitewater race. Being “girly” does not have to limit what a person is able to accomplish but just can be an

expression of gender. This pride in being a woman within these sports changes the culture to not be as centered around manliness.

## Girl groups

Women have created all-women groups to counteract the disproportionate representation of men in these sports. Often movies and content on social media in skiing, whitewater sports, and skateboarding are heavily dominated by men. I have seen these all women groups allow space for women to learn and be welcomed into the sport or create a space to highlight a group of women who exceed highly in their respective sports.

As mentioned in chapter four, Team Tittiez is a kayak group that shares content exclusively of women kayaking extreme whitewater. The formation of this group was in part a response to the whitewater media typically only featuring men in advertisements and movies. Not only does this media show women kayaking but it features women kayaking extreme rapids and performing maneuvers usually seen only performed by men. Team Tittiez created space for women on these platforms and normalized the depictions of women in extreme whitewater. While their media may only feature women within the group, at kayak races they are many times the women who are passing around glitter to other women and cheering loudly for all the women. The creation of this group and their content changes the culture of extreme sports to not be as male-centric. Groups like Team Titties increase the visibility off women within the sport through intentionally featuring only women paddling within their videos and content. Even within the videos the content is more female centered such as highlighting female artists in the background music.

Meg, who was previously mentioned within chapter four, started a non-binary skate group called “The Darling Shred” in Bozeman, to make skating more inclusive for people who did not identify as men. The goal of The Darling Shred was to eliminate barriers that women typically face to fitting into the culture. Eliminating some of the barriers to fitting into the sport mentioned in chapters 3 and 4, like sticking out and which causes many women to shy away from the sport, also changes the culture to be more inclusive towards all people.

Similarly in Bozeman there is a Backcountry Squatters chapter in which many of the women I interviewed were heavily involved. The organization describes itself as a “A network of college clubs dedicated to growing women’s participation, leadership, and representation in the outdoor industry and community.” Backcountry Squatters provides support for women whether financially or by hosting get togethers to encourage women involvement in sports such as skiing, snowboard, and whitewater. The group provides resources to make outdoor spaces more intentional in being inclusive to all people. This intentional space of inclusivity changes the narrative so there can be conversations about exclusivity within these extreme sports. Meg, who is quite involved with the organization, expressed that this organization “offers an inclusive and welcoming environment unlike any other outdoor environment I have been a part of and challenges me to strive to achieve this inclusivity in all extreme sports spaces.”

All these women groups challenge the masculine norms and make women more visible within the sport whether it is through social media posts that purely feature women or education on how these spaces have been historically dominated by straight white men. These cumulative acts of rebellion towards the masculine culture allow space for these sports to place less emphasis on masculinity and more emphasis on the joy that all may receive from participation.

## Conclusion

The masculine culture of kayaking, skiing, and skateboarding have long been barriers to women's participation, but a growing community of women has resulted in changes to the culture. The catalyst to change in making women more visible and welcome in these spaces has been seen through friends acting as guides to other women in the sport, feminine modes of dress and emergence of all women groups. While most of this thesis emphasizes how this culture is still masculine even with the presence of women, women still have influenced the culture to change so that there is a deemphasis between having to be masculine to feel truly an authentic part of the sport.



## CHAPTER SIX: GALS WITH GRIT

*She waits in the eddy above the 20-foot drop, she paddles out to peek at the water funneling to a point where there is no river but just a drop off. “What am I doing here?” Carly asks herself and debates hopping out of her kayak and portaging the rapid. The sun shines brightly, snowy peaks stand tall in the distance, beautiful flowers, and trees line the banks, but all Carly focuses on is the obstacle that remains ahead. She feels overwhelmed by adrenaline. There is a pull in her body towards the riverbank trail where she can put her boat on her shoulder and walk below the falls to continue paddling. This was the safer option. The easier option. The voice of her parents saying “you could get really hurt” rings through her head. She stops and refocuses her attention back on the waterfall. She was capable and two boys who had been kayaking for less time than her just launched off it. What made her think she could not? “Right, I am a girl” she reminds herself with a joking smile.*

Carly often found herself trapped in fear which she felt generally was due to growing up in a female body and being taught “to be careful.” She repeatedly compared her experiences with fear to those of her brother who was also a whitewater kayaker and started before she did. While her younger brother was encouraged to kayak by her parents, Carly’s parents encouraged her to dive deeper into her passion about the piano. Like her brother, she had always enjoyed thrilling outdoor activities such as skiing, but her parents never even considered the possibility of her becoming a kayaker.

I have returned to Bozeman three times since concluding my summer research in August of 2021. During my return I was able to reconnect with many of my informants grounding me again in my initial inspiration for my research. I was simply surrounded by women whose fearlessness and love of thrill transcends gender binaries. I also resonate with this search for

exhilaration and found my cravings satisfied with activities like whitewater kayaking and skiing. During my visits I was transported into a different part of my identity that emphasizes taking risks rather than relying on logical intellect which I experience while at school. The ways I consider moving my body and wear my clothing have quite different implications in Bozeman than they do in college. People at school have frequently commented on my dress, implying that it is “grungy” or “edgy” mostly due to the lack of femininity within my dress. In Bozeman I was never told these things about the way I dressed.

This thesis focused on illustrations of the ways in which extreme sports culture is masculine. Such repetition of scenarios creates a masculine culture such that women within the sport tend to embrace performances of masculinity rather than reject them. I have sought to demonstrate how women use gendered performance to navigate masculine sportscares and create space for themselves within this culture.

While men still dominate these sports, women’s participation continues to expand. In turn, women have challenged the hegemony of masculinity. Women have started embracing their femininity within these sports which has normalized women being in these spaces. One example of women embracing their gender is “slut strands,” which are defined by the ‘Slut Strand Society,’ a ski apparel brand, as “two strands of hair commonly used by the ladies of skiing & snowboarding to express femininity under all dat gear.” Another example of the expression of femininity would be when women wear glitter during their whitewater kayak races. These actions support women’s involvement in the sports but at the same time highlight how manliness is the norm within these sports. This progress gives me hope that extreme sports culture can be more inclusive towards women so that more women can enjoy the thrill and joy while skiing, kayaking or skateboarding.

*She heard the group hooting below and looked over at her friend Todd floating in his boat next to her in the eddy. "You got this easy," he reminds her over the sounds crashing of the water fall 30 feet downstream. Carly takes off her helmet, fills it up with water and dumps it on her head. "A good ol' river baptism" is how Carly described this act. After three deep breathes, Carly grasps hold of her paddle and approaches the eddy line to peel out into the main flow of the rapid. She faces downstream slowly approaching the drop and focuses her energy on the next few strokes. The voices of doubt and fear go somewhat silent in the back of her mind. She was not sure whether this reflected her need to focus on survival or an inner confidence she hadn't recognized. One stroke, two strokes, and then she tucks into position looking down at the pool of water below. In this moment Carly is not terrified, but rather is focused on her body flying when finally, she crashes into the firm water below. As expected, her head is now underwater and the bottom of the boat shines in the sun. Quickly and smoothly, she combat rolls up to be greeted by the sunlight, loud cheers, and a beer being tossed at her. She looked back at the wall of white cascading quickly down and felt at home in her mind and body.*

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